

VZCZCXYZ3493
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDS #0656/01 0661341
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 061341Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9868
RUEHWD/AMEMBASSY WINDHOEK PRIORITY 0545
RUEHSB/AMEMBASSY HARARE PRIORITY 0469

UNCLAS ADDIS ABABA 000656

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/PDPA, IIP, IIP/S, IIP/SDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: Post Report of Visit of IIP Speaker Elbert "Bert" Ransom to Ethiopia (February 1 - 13)

¶1. SUMMARY: IIP Speaker Rev. Dr. Elbert "Bert" Ransom completed a highly-successful, twelve-day visit to Ethiopia on the topic of "The Role of Faith Communities in Social Change: Contributions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims to the American Civil Rights Movement," as the main focus of post's Black History Month programming. Ransom spoke to religious leaders in Addis Ababa, Harar, Bahir Dar, and Gondar, large audiences of students and townspeople in Bahir Dar, Gondar, and Dire Dawa, and opened post's photo exhibition, "Building Islam in Detroit." Ransom's message of inter-faith cooperation was well-received in all locations, indicating a "huge wellspring of goodwill," as he put it, for cross-faith cooperation on social issues. Ransom's experience and recollections of the Civil Rights Movement and his work with Dr. King were especially well-received and he engaged in extensive media outreach as well, to include Ethiopia's leading talk show Post will follow up this visit with a proposal to the Department for setting up interfaith councils to address local issues in Ethiopia as a means of fostering greater Christian-Muslim cooperation and mutual understanding across the country. END SUMMARY.

PATRIARCH AND SHEIKH, PRIESTS AND IMAMS

¶2. Rev. Ransom's visit to Ethiopia launched post's new faith communities outreach strategy, drawing on the experience of the American Civil Rights Movement. This new strategy lies not in "Muslim Outreach" per se, but rather in bringing all faith communities together to promote tolerance, mutual understanding, and inter-faith cooperation to address common issues of social concern. In doing so, post hopes to strengthen indigenous religious communities (especially Muslim groups) against outside/foreign influences and to build on Ethiopia's long tradition of tolerance and mutual respect between Christianity and Islam.

¶3. Since faith communities are central to this strategy, Rev. Ransom met with His Holiness Patriarch Paulos, of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, at the beginning of his visit. The normal 30-minute audience stretched to over an hour as bishops and monks were kept waiting in the anteroom while the Patriarch described the role of the Church in Ethiopian history and culture, and Rev. Ransom discussed inter-faith cooperation in fighting segregation in the United States. Clearly moved by Ransom's interest in the Church, and elated when he learned that Ransom's grandson is named "Addis," the Patriarch telephoned the seminary where Ransom was to speak later that same day, instructing them to give Ransom a full display of Ethiopian Church chanting and dancing at its best. That 20-minute experience of Orthodox liturgical dancing, chanting, and drumming, rich in African traditions and rhythms, moved Ransom to tears as he described his own spiritual connection to Ethiopia. The audience of students, clerics, and professors engaged in hearty discussion of the Civil Rights Movement and Ransom's own experience of living and working with Dr. King, as well as the role of Faith in the

African-American community.

¶4. Ransom also met with the leaders of the Muslim Community in a well-attended roundtable near the Mercato section of Addis Ababa. With Sheikh Elias Redman, head of the Ethiopian Muslim Community presiding, Ransom interacted with the audience of more than fifty clerics and other Muslim leaders (including women Muslim leaders) on how Christians, Jews, and Muslims found common cause in fighting segregation. Lunch afterward enabled Ransom and Embassy PD staff to engage the religious leaders and student leaders more intensively as discussion continued on the influence of Wahabis in Ethiopia, cooperation with the Christian community in addressing poverty and other developmental issues, and the life and work of Dr. King and Malcolm X. After leaving the luncheon, Dr. Ransom commented how impressed he was with the "number of people of good will there are in Ethiopia."

TALKING ISLAM IN HARAR - BUILDING ISLAM IN DETROIT

¶5. Ransom met with 30 Muslim religious leaders at the Office of the President of Harar Region on February 6. The meeting was organized by the head of the Harar Region Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, Sheikh Ibrahim Sharif, and included religious leaders from Harar and Oromia Regions. Rev. Ransom spoke of the struggle of African-Americans to achieve civil rights, beginning with the bus boycott led by Rev. Martin Luther King in Montgomery, Alabama. His story struck a responsive cord with the Muslim leaders who commented on how they could learn from the civil rights struggle and apply it to achieving a just and equal society and alleviate poverty in Ethiopia. Another person, who had followed the civil rights movement with his Peace Corps friends in the 1960s, considered it a privilege to meet personally someone who had participated in the struggle.

¶6. Rev. Ransom also opened the photo exhibition, "Building Islam in Detroit," with Mayor Arif Hussein of Harar. This superb exhibit, which post obtained on its own initiative from the University of Michigan, shows Muslim life in Detroit and how faith communities in Detroit have lived and worked together for more than a century. Ransom noted in his remarks that the exhibition showed the variety of Muslim life in America and how it reflected favorably on the U.S. and freedom of religion for all Americans.

A PACKED HOUSE AT BAHIR DAR UNIVERSITY

¶7. Before speaking at the university, Ransom met with a group of about 25 Muslim leaders (both male and female) in Bahir Dar. Greeting everyone with a hearty "As salaam a laikum," a huge smile, and a warm hug or handshake, he immediately broke the ice and put everyone at ease as he spoke of Muslim-Christian relations, our common social concerns, how faith groups must work together to make life better for everyone in society, etc. The imam of Bahir Dar's main mosque, a young graduate of a Sudanese university, invited him to visit the mosque later that day, which Ransom gladly accepted. As a result of this contact, post will follow up with this young imam in the hope of doing more programs with the Muslim community in Bahir Dar, something he asked us to do in his own hope of strengthening our relationship.

¶8. After lunch, over 600 Muslim and Christian students, including one lone female, packed a large lecture hall to hear Rev. Ransom at Bahir Dar University, near the shore of beautiful Lake Tana, the headwaters of the Blue Nile. For almost two hours, all eyes in the packed house were riveted on Ransom as he described how Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, his work with Dr. King, how he managed Resurrection City, and marched with Whites, Blacks, Jews, Christians, and Muslims across the South and in Chicago in the 1950s and '60s. After his introduction by the university President, Ransom's preaching in the rhythmic cadences of his beloved Baptist Church captivated the students and drew in many more from the plaza outside who caught his voice over the loudspeakers. Within minutes, the lecture hall was packed and many more students were standing outside, craning their necks to see and hear this champion of the American Civil Rights Movement. When question time came, dozens of

students clamored for a chance to speak while Ransom and the PAO jointly fielded questions on the African-American experience, USG Africa policy, Kenya, democracy in Ethiopia, etc.

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED IN GONDAR

¶9. The next day, Ransom headed to Gondar, the old imperial capital of Ethiopia, where he spent a free day visiting the old palaces and churches. Then on Sunday morning, sitting on the steps of the oldest church in Gondar, Ransom was the guest of honor at a special church service with honorary poems recited in the ancient Ge'ez language, liturgical dancing and chanting, and then an invitation to preach/speak to the large crowd sitting on the grass in front of the church. The hundreds of people in attendance clearly appreciated this visit by an associate of Dr. King, but surprisingly enough, many of the clerics and those educated in religious schools had not even heard of Dr. King! Unfazed, Ransom described how this great Martyr of African-American rights and advocate of the downtrodden around the world touches our lives even today - a message that resonated very well with the many poor people in attendance.

***** *****
BERT RANSOM - A GREAT SPEAKER WITH A GREAT MESSAGE
***** *****

¶10. PAO knew Ransom well from previous assignments, having programmed him twice in Kosovo and once in Ireland before coming to Ethiopia. This was also Ransom's first visit to Africa, and Ethiopia was his first country in Africa to visit, surely a great way to start his trip! Ransom relates very well to his audiences wherever he goes and he especially knows how to relate to people of faith, whatever their faith tradition. One idea that developed out of his visit is to start "Inter-Faith Councils" in one or two cities to bring religious leaders together purely to address social issues and, in doing so, to address and reduce religious tensions that may be developing in their own communities. Post will explore this possibility for future programming as it is a natural corollary to our strategy of "Faith Communities Outreach."

¶11. Post enthusiastically endorses Rev. Elbert "Bert" Ransom for further programming by IIP; in fact, this post may request him again if the idea of the councils continues to develop. Besides being an intrepid traveler of infinite patience and a ready laugh, Ransom is also a great "citizen diplomat" for America who can charm and engage substantively virtually any audience you throw at him. He is simply

superb. Post thanks IIP for making this program happen and we hope to host him again here in Ethiopia.

YAMAMOTO